



OVERCOMING EMPLOYMENT BARRIERS: HOW TO HELP THE LONG-TERM UNEMPLOYED GET BACK TO WORK

INTRODUCTION

Even though the economy is improving, the long-term unemployed still face considerable barriers in their efforts to reenter the workforce. Research conducted by Rand Ghayad revealed that the long-term unemployed are about half as likely as the short-term unemployed to get a callback for a job interview.¹ And last year, the Brookings Institution reported that only 11 percent of those who were long-term unemployed in a given month returned to steady, full-time employment a year later.² While there are many reasons the long-term unemployed have difficulty getting back to work, perhaps the most significant is the concern employers have about gaps in employment records. If this concern is not addressed, the job seeker is likely to experience rejection by employers which may cause them to withdraw from active engagement in the job search process. It is, therefore, important for the job seeker to understand the barriers they face and be proactive about overcoming them.

This Bulletin provides several practical strategies that can be used to help address barriers long-term unemployed workers may face when returning to work. The strategies are intended to complement the job development and placement efforts already in place through your project.

FILL THE GAP!

For many employers, gaps in the employment record are viewed as a “red flag.” Some of this

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prejudice can be overcome by having project staff develop close working relationships with employers that pave the way for making referrals that are favorably received. Even in those instances where that type of relationship exists, the job candidate still needs to convince the employer that the gap in his/her work record does not detract from their ability to be an outstanding employee. Some strategies for overcoming this barrier include:

- 🔗 *Securing a part-time job* – This strategy demonstrates that they have remained active in the work environment. It also boosts self-esteem, brings in a paycheck, sharpens skills, and provides opportunities for networking. An alternative to this strategy is to create one’s own job by engaging in part-time work as a consultant or contractor. Showing productivity and initiative during a period of unemployment helps dispel any concerns an employer may have about a job candidate’s competitive edge.
- 🔗 *Volunteering with a nonprofit organization* – The National Service Corporation determined that volunteering increases the chances of getting a job by 27 percent³. While it’s preferable to have a volunteer position that uses skills related to an

¹ http://www.securitiesmosaic.com/gateway/FEDRES/SPEECHES/ugd_576e9a_f6cf3b6661e44621ad26547112f66691.pdf

² <http://www.brookings.edu/about/projects/bpea/papers/2014/are-longterm-unemployed-margins-labor-market>

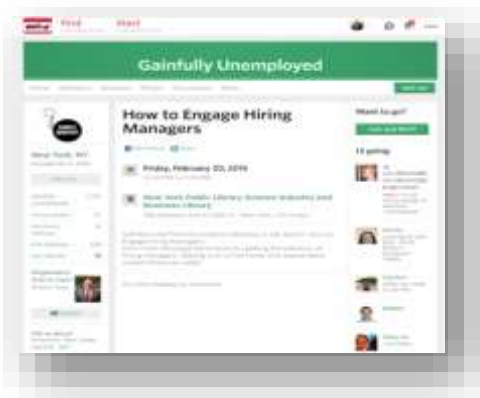
³ http://www.nationalservice.gov/sites/default/files/upload/employment_research_report.pdf

individual's employment goals, any volunteer engagement demonstrates that the job candidate has the initiative and capacity to stay active, learn new skills and sharpen existing ones, and work with others. The Internet provides many avenues for connecting a program participant to volunteer activities. Perhaps the best no-cost service is VolunteerMatch.org which allows the user to identify opportunities based on geographic location and interest. It can also connect the user to virtual volunteer activities – tasks that can be performed at a distance – which greatly expand the possibility of making a good match.



local America Job Center is a good source of information about upcoming events that are related to a job seeker's field of interest. To maximize the effectiveness of this strategy, you'll need to coach participants on job fair etiquette. Some good tips can be found here: <http://careers.umbc.edu/skills/jobfair.php>.

- ✦ *Join a professional association or society related to their career choice and go to their meetings and events* – Most associations maintain a job board for its members, but attending at a local meeting is more effective for making a connection that can lead to a job interview.
- ✦ *Find and attend a local networking group on Meetup* – Meetup is an Internet-based service that helps people organize groups or find a group of interest to them. More than 9,000 groups organized by Meetup get together in local communities each day, many of which are related to career networking.



OVERCOMING EMPLOYER RESISTANCE THROUGH NETWORKING

One of the best ways to overcome an employer's hesitance to hiring the long-term unemployed is to ensure that the referral comes from a source known to the employer. While your project's career advisors and job developers should be the primary resource for these "warm" referrals, program participants need to use every available opportunity to network and market themselves to employers in their community. The more people they meet face-to-face, the more likely they will encounter someone who can provide them with a "warm" referral. Here are some examples of the networking strategies they can use to generate those referrals:

- ✦ *Attending job fairs* – Job fairs offer numerous opportunities to network with both employers and other job seekers. Your

- ✦ *Join a job club* – One of the most important purposes of a job club is to help participants network in their search for employment. If your project does not have a job club, you can locate an existing one in your community at <http://www.servicelocator.org/NationalLocators.asp?cat=job+club>.
- ✦ *Find a mentor* – While finding a mentor may appear to be a daunting task, industry professionals who are established in their careers or recently retired are often willing to help if asked. One way to identify a potential mentor is through a college

alumni association. These associations usually maintain a list of graduates who have agreed to advise fellow alumni which greatly increases the opportunity for a good match.

🔗 **Create an effective, up-to-date LinkedIn profile** – Because the vast majority of recruiters use LinkedIn to identify suitable candidates for employment, this strategy is a *must* for job seekers today. You'll need to make sure that the participant has created an effective profile that is visible to recruiters. Techniques for maximizing the effectiveness of a LinkedIn profile can be found on the community of practice website at <https://etagrantees.workforce3one.org/view/4011429740794679816/info> and <https://etagrantees.workforce3one.org/view/2001414061168563098/info>. After they have created a profile, the job seekers should be encouraged to join LinkedIn groups that apply to them and participate in group discussions.

COACHING FOR SUCCESS

Before referring a program graduate to an employer, make sure they can respond to any concerns that an employer might have about the gap in their employment record and their ability to meet the requirements of the job. They need to be able to express excitement about returning to work and demonstrate that they will be able to do whatever it takes to meet or exceed the employer's expectations. Ultimately, they need to be able to tell a story – in their words, not yours – that highlights their ability to get the job done.

Videotaped mock interviews are the best way to prepare candidates and provide them with the feedback they need to interview effectively. It's important to provide constructive criticism, preferably in writing using a standard form. If done in a group setting, everyone participating should critique the interview. Emphasis should be placed on identifying something that

the interviewee did well and something that needs improvement. When conducting the interview, include challenging questions that your program graduates are likely to face. Here are several that might reflect an employer's concerns about hiring a person who has been out of the workforce for an extended period of time along with strategies for responding to those concerns.

Question: Most of our employees are recent college graduates and much younger than you are. What are your thoughts on that?

The underlying concern may be that the older long-term unemployed workers might not fit in or may not have the stamina to keep up with younger workers. It's important to demonstrate a high level of energy and enthusiasm throughout the interview and illustrate one's ability to work in teams whose members include different generations. For example, "I've always enjoyed working with younger employees. We learned much from each other, and it's easier to solve problems when your team has members with different perspectives."

Question: You've got the credential, but you don't have any work experience related to it. What makes you think that you're qualified for the job?

The underlying concern may be that the training has not adequately prepared the candidate for employment. The interviewee needs to understand the skills and knowledge needed for the position and be able to demonstrate how the training provided him or her with the skills and knowledge needed to get the job done. It's also helpful to identify past experiences that involve any transferrable skills and knowledge, especially if these experiences demonstrate a track record of results. For example, "I'm a quick learner and I have a track record for getting things done. I'm excited to bring the new skills I have

learned here.” Or, “With my training and past experience, I have no doubt that I can do a better job than most in a shorter period of time.”

Question: Based on your past experience, you’d be earning a lot less on this job. How do you feel about that?

The underlying concern may be that the candidate will be unhappy with the lower salary and may leave if another job with a higher wage comes along. The interviewee needs to make the case that he/she understands the employer’s concern and that he or she is in it for the long haul. For example, “I can understand why you’re concerned about that. But sometimes it’s necessary to take a step backward to move ahead in one’s career. I’ll work hard in this position, and I have no doubt that I can exceed your expectations.” Or, “That’s a valid concern. But I’ve decided to make a career change and at this point in my life, it’s more important for me to use my skills in a job that truly interests me than maintaining my previous salary level.”

Another option, if it fits, is for the interviewee to say that changing circumstances have provided an opportunity for a career change. For example, “Now that the children are out of college, I have lower expenses and can take on a job that is more in line with my true career interests.”

This question also provides the opportunity to talk about specific factors other than salary that have motivated the interviewee in the past. Depending on the job, the interviewee can talk about factors such as the desire to help others or provide excellent customer service. Whatever the motivation, it’s important for the job applicant to provide specific examples from their work or volunteer experience in which these factors contributed to excellent performance in the past. For example, “This

job opportunity appeals to me because it involves a lot of customer service. I’ve always been motivated to excel in that type of work and have received many commendations for my work with customers.”

ADVOCATE, ADVOCATE, ADVOCATE!

As you urge employers to give consideration to your program’s graduates, be prepared to address any reservations they may have about hiring the long-term unemployed by marketing the benefits of using your service and countering misconceptions with facts and program statistics:

Benefit: On average, U.S. companies spend roughly \$3,500 for a new hire.⁴ We can provide your company with pre-screened, trained, and highly motivated candidates at no cost to you.

Fact: A research study involving more than 500,000 performance data measures from nearly 20,000 employees revealed virtually no difference between the performance of those who had not held a job within the past 5 years and those who had.⁵

Perhaps the best advocates for your program are employers who have hired your graduates in the past. If an employer is pleased with your services, ask them to provide you with a testimonial that can be used in your program’s brochures or handouts. You’ll also want to ask them for a personal referral to an employer they know who might have job openings.

We hope you will find these strategies useful in your efforts to help the long-term unemployed secure work. If you have any tips that you would like to share with your colleagues, please let us know, and we may feature them in an upcoming Bulletin or webinar.

⁴ http://marketing.bernsin.com/rs/bernsin/images/111111_ES_TAFB-ExecSumm_KOL.pdf
⁵ <http://www.cornerstoneondemand.com/sites/default/files/whitepaper/csod-wp-long-term-unemployed-102014.pdf>